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She Did What?!
by S. Ray Granade
1/25/2017

My wife, the high school History teacher, had just returned from a long day at school with a huge pile of papers. This was not a rarity; no, this was commonplace. But spring had come: days were lengthening, air growing milder, leisure pursuits beckoning. The weekend stretched ahead. Beyond the proverbial fork in the road lay either more drudgery through grading or the delights of free time. Being the dedicated teacher that she was, she opted for grading.

We sat in the den and talked in desultory fashion about grading as, falling into a customary verbal groove, she reminded me of my privileged and comparatively easier life as a college teacher. Foremost on her mind was the stack of book reports fresh from high schooler hands. They had chosen books on approval, so none were new to her. A few choices she thought a bit advanced for their readers, but she was always willing to give students plenty of leeway. One report in particular bothered her, but she fretted over the whole. Glancing over from my own laptop, I mentioned my willingness to help with a preliminary pass. Running a line of each through Google should assuage her concern of plagiarism and then she could proceed with a freer mind. She agreed to the process, but felt it her duty to search herself.

Before she had gotten very far, I heard the sharp intake of breath that always signals discovery. "Look at this!" she commanded. Being an obedient husband, I got up to glance at her laptop screen. Her search had highlighted the first line of an Amazon book review. I turned to the paper, then alternated more carefully between the two. They were identical. As was the next line, and the next, and so on through to the end. Clearly the student had cut and pasted the review beneath her own name. Rarely had I seen a more clear-cut example of plagiarism. "Now what?" she queried.

We talked a bit about options and she mulled. Eventually she decided to follow her usual course when she suspected cheating and lay the evidence out for the student and ask that student's reaction in a private conversation. Her experience was that most students would confess rather than try to bluff it out. She would have that conference before turning all the papers back. Satisfied, she prepared for the coming conversation, which she (as always) dreaded.

Monday evening she told me the story. Gifted storyteller that she is, she enabled me to mentally watch the scene unfold. The student had obeyed the summons and sat down beside Ronnie as directed. Ronnie laid out the paper that the student had submitted: "Do you recognize this?"

After a quick but nervous affirmative from the student, Ronnie laid down the Amazon review screens that she had printed out: “Do these look familiar?”

The girl gasped, right hand flying to cover her mouth instinctively. Not recognizing the admission implicit in her statement, she blurted into her cupped hand “I can’t believe that my mother would do that!”

The rest of the story was anticlimactic. The mother had pushed to help, the student averred, and had produced a finished product—which the student turned in. Ronnie proclaimed justice tempered with mercy: rather than fail the course, the student failed the assignment. Recognizing the mercy, the student apologized and left. I wondered what conversation the student had with her mother that evening. I also wondered if the mother would attend remaining parent-teacher conferences. I never learned the answer to either query.